Love Is Justice
June 15, 1969
Hosea 1:10; selected

Herman Melville was a gifted teller of sea tales, but he was also a pretty good philosopher and theologian. In his symbolic tragedy "Billy Budd", Claggart unjustly accused the tongue-tied boy of helping to plot a mutiny. Finally, after endless provocation Billy hit Claggart and the blow accidently killed him. Everybody knew that the death was an accident, and that the blow was the result of harrassment and great stress. The ship's officers were ready to acquit him of any crime. But the captain, a stern disciplinarian by the name of Vere, convinced them that their duty was to stringently apply the articles of war, particularly that provision regarding the striking a superior officer. So they hanged Billy. The law was obeyed: justice was served. Or was it?

The relationship of justice to love has always troubled and fascinated the mind of man. Where does love stop, and justice begin? For the past several weeks we have been thinking about God in terms of love. We have seen that our heritage teaches us that love is not so much one of the characteristics of God, as it is His very essence. We've thought about the definition of love as an activity rather than a feeling both the love of God and the love of man for his fellow man .. But still it is problematic. What is love? When does justice come in?

Parents know that their love for their children is far more than a feeling. They know that love is not an easy tolerance of whatever the child happens to be doing. In his best seller, "Between Parent and Child", Dr. Haim Ginott draws a very clear distinction between a healthy permissiveness and over-permissiveness. Over-permissiveness, - of over destructive behavior says "I don't really care." Parents learn that justice has something to do with love and that love without justice isn't really love.

But in matters outside the home - in religion, for instance, the relationship is not always that clear. Commenting on his conversion to Judaism, Sammy Davis Jr. said: "As I see it the difference is that the Christian religion preaches love thy neighbor and the Jewish religion preaches justice, and I think justice is the big thing we need."(Esquire 10/59)

Now that's very poor theology, but it is an accurate reflection of the image Christian faith has at this point. Too frequently our love, as Christians, comes out as nothing more than indiscriminate sentiment. Too frequently it is like the man who was hopelessly in debt; who inherited a fortune, and gave it all to the poor - without paying his creditors.

The relationship of love to justice is very difficult; and I have been helped by the insight that there really is no relationship: that you can't have one without the other: that when you're talking about love, you're talking about justice. I'd like to suggest simply, that love is justice.

The late Paul Tillich, one of the finest philosophic thinkers of this century advanced the concept that Christian love, acted out, is simply justice. He taught that in God himself, love and justice are a unity, and that both words indicate the same divine characteristic. The trouble is, again, with the strong tendency toward sentimentalism within the Christian Church. Without giving it much thought men define love as something you feel - not something you do. On this basis then, it is easy to convince yourself that you love your neighbor even though you don't do anything about it and it is possible to teach, as the great proponents of the social gospel did, that if you feel love for a man you really ought to deal justly with him. Tillich had the profound audacity to ask a very simple question at this point - "How does one love another man, if he is dealing unjustly with him?" The answer is obvious: unjustice is unlove. Love is justice.

The separate ideas that God's love - and that God is just are very old, nearly as old as recorded history. But this concept that love and justice are the same thing is a uniquely Juaeo-Christian notion that has its roots in the history of Israel.

So now we must digress, to that time centuries before Christ when the Hebrew people were wandering around in the desert of Sinai on there way from Egyptian slavery to the promised land of Canaan. During that wilderness wandering the people of Israel became a nation. In the desert they received their law, the covenant with God, their national identity - and their peculiar theology of one creative God who wants his people to live in faithfulness to Him. The time of the desert was the gensis of the Nation: it was remembered fondly in the same way that we nostalgically recall the colonial days and the Declaration of Independence.

But when the people came into the land, the land of Canaan, things began to change. Primarily a desert people, the Israelites were delighted and surprised by the fertility and lush productiveness of Canaan. They noticed that the canaanites worshipped the Baal gods in a relighon of fertility. They made a rather logical deciaion: if the Baalims are responsible for this unique productiveness they must be worth worshipping. And so the Israelites, maintaining their own religion, began to also join the rites of the Baalins. In so doing they violated their first and most important law, and to the sensitive and articulate among them the future looked very ominous. Surely the righteous God would heap vengenance and punishment on his way ward children.

Around the year 750 B.C., in the midst of this rather ambiguous religious situation, a brooding genius of a man called Hosea, contemplated the tragedy of his nation and found himself relating it to the terrible tragedy of his own experience.

Hosea had married a woman by the name of Gomer - a faithless woman, inclined to be a little promiscuous. They had three children the second two of which were the results of Gomer's infidelity. Finally she sold herself to another man as his mistress. Hosea had been wronged and humiliated and degraded. His wife's leaving actually saved him from doing what the law required - for, by law, he could not remain married to an adultress.

The trouble was Hosea still loved Gomer. Even in her infidelity: even in his humiliation he still loved her deeply and wanted her as his wife. What does one do under these circumstances? That was the agony of Hosea, and at this point Hosea realized that his own bitter experience was the same as God's treatment by his people.

Israel had prostituted her faith; and violated the covenant and been seduced into infidelity by the religion of the Canaanites. Justice demanded punishment. As a prophet Hosea felt that some sort of divine retribution was inevitable. The land would be laid waste: the people would die of wars and starvation.

But is that all love does? In the eleventh chapter Hosea speaks for the Lord, and in the words we hear him speaking for himself and his own situation:

"How, oh how, can I give you up, Ephraim!
How, oh how, can I hand you over, Israel!
How can I turn you into a Sodom!
How can I treat you like a Gomarrah!
My heart recoils within me,
All my compassion is kindled.
I will not destroy Ephraim again
For I am God and not man,
I am the Holy One in your very midst,
And I have not come to destroy."

(11:8-9, J.B. Phillips)

What does justice require? What does love do? Hosea went out looking for his wife and when he found her he brought her back, paying not only in money but in damaged pride. He brought her home, and for a period "put her away." That is - love is not easy tolerance: love does not say 'That's all right Gomer: you've had your fling: let's hope it doesn't happen again. Love is justice.' The wrong Gomer did was answered by discipline. But repentence resulted and everything began anew.

That is how God would deal with Israel. Not carelessly overlooking every

infidelity. Neither in revenge, punishing the offender for the sake of punishment. But in a love - the very nature of which is to be justice.

Now - what do we learn here? What are the implications? Time will allow just a few suggestions.

First, we understand on an intellectual level that love is justice. We learn to tighten our belts semantically by differentiating between love without justice which is simple sentiment, and justice without love which is simple retribution.

Second, this intellectual formula has some very practical meanings. In our role as parents we see that if our relationship with our children does not contain a disciplined justice we can't call it love. By the same token we see that there is nothing more sterile than punishment for the sake of punishment, and that justice without the possibility of loving redemption is not really justice.

On a wider scale I would hope we might be moved to look again at what is called justice under the law when applied to someone who breaks the law. In fact, our second look will reveal a system that practiced punitive retribution without any thought of redemption. Capital punishment - is not justice - it is retribution. If we are concerned about the uniquely Christian concept of what it means to be just, we should be oppossed to it, and actively so. In the whole complex matter of dealing with the criminal the Christian needs to keep insisting that whatever is done he carefully weighs and measures by the standards of justice, and not merely reflect the neurotic need of our society for revenge.

The implications are many and I am sure that you are not only disagreeing with some of the ones I have drawn, but are thinking of some of your own. That is good.

Finally, I would hope that in all of this we have heard the good word of the Gospel. We are dealing with a God who really cares about us; a God who cares enough to be displeased when we stumble and fall; a God who cares enough to be angry at the evil and dishonesty in which we participate. But lest our religion be an expression of fear we must remember that our judge is our redeemer; that the one who measures us - measures us lovingly.

The winsome words of Hosea remind us that our God has been pursuing his children in love down through the centuries: that his pursuit took him among men and ultimately to the cross: that no matter who we are, or what we have done or what we will do, God continues to pursue everyone of us - until we turn to him in faith and obedience.

Theat is the good news. God is love - justice: justice - love, now and forevermore. Amen.